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SUBJECT: MFA GOALS FOR 2004 AND BEYOND

Ref: 03 Hanoi 3351

1. (SBU) Summary. MFA Policy Planning Department Deputy Director General Bui Thanh Son, in a meeting with Pol/C on February 10, reiterated Vietnam's commitment to moving forward on U.S.-Vietnam relations "in all fields, including military" in 2004. He pondered about the possibility of a bilateral meeting at APEC with the President for Prime Minister Khai, with a visit to the U.S. to follow in 2005 on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of bilateral relations. He cited Vietnam's relations with its three neighbors as the GVN's top foreign policy priorities, ranking relations with "Big Powers" -- including the U.S. -- as only number two. Vietnam remains committed to more active participation in regional organizations and continues its quest for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 2008. Embassy does not believe that Son's comments mark a renunciation of GVN hopes for a 2004 Prime Ministerial visit to the U.S., and continues to welcome the possibility of a USG delegation soon discussing with the GVN our concerns and goals in advance of such a visit, whether this year or next year. End Summary.

US-Vietnam

2. (SBU) DDG Son, who described his Department's role as providing advice to the Foreign Minister on overall foreign policy as well as specifically responsible for "coordinating policy initiatives" of the various other Departments within the MFA, reiterated the GVN's commitment to improving the bilateral relationship with the U.S. in 2004 "in all fields, including military." He welcomed dialogue about "what we (the GVN) can do" to move the relationship forward. When Pol/C noted unofficial GVN inquiries about the possibility of a visit to the U.S. in 2004 by the Prime Minister and the likelihood that such a trip would have to be preceded by a variety of positive steps by the GVN in fields such as human rights and religious freedom, DDG Son commented that "we are doing things that you may not know about." Pol/C urged greater information-sharing and access, citing our recent frustration in not being able to obtain details about the Tet amnesty (which Vice Minister of Public Security Nguyen Van Huong had promised would include persons of concern to the USG) or about a reported December 2003 directive by the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) to speed up registration of churches in the Central Highlands. DDG Son admitted that lack of transparency remained a problem in the GVN system, but offered no fixes.

3. (SBU) DDG Son floated the possibility of a bilateral meeting at APEC between the President and Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, to be followed in 2005 with a Prime Ministerial visit linked to the 10th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations. Pol/C noted that the USG had originally been contemplating a Prime Ministerial visit in late 2003, but the apparent GVN moratorium on high level visits to the U.S. during U.S.-led military action in Iraq in early 2003 had slowed momentum in relations for several months. He urged greater coordination by the GVN on high-level visits, so that the USG does not have to handle three to four GVN ministerial-level visits within the space of a few weeks, as in September/October 2003. He urged positive GVN actions that would justify an eventual Prime Ministerial visit, which will need to be substantive, not merely ceremonial. He urged the MFA to ensure that all future high level dialogues increasingly focus on strategic issues, not litanies of complaints on minor problems like catfish, flag bills, etc. Additional cooperation on counterterrorism would also be especially welcome, even if only in the form of more responsiveness to U.S. watchlists and other information shared with the GVN.

4. (SBU) Pol/C asked about the MFA's plans for a bilateral political dialogue in 2004, citing the interest expressed by Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang to Ambassador in December 2003. DDG Son, whose Department hosted the 2001 political dialogue in Hanoi, welcomed the resumption of such a dialogue but was unaware of any specific plans in 2004. He promised to investigate this possibility. He asked about the likelihood also of holding a human rights dialogue; Pol/C reviewed USG disappointment that previous dialogues

had not yet led to enough substantive progress on issues of concern to the USG to justify another round. DDG Son indicated that the MFA might nonetheless issue another invitation for a human rights dialogue in 2004, or at least incorporate human rights issues in the eventual political dialogue.

Priorities

15. (SBU) When asked about competing priorities among the GVN's various diplomatic activities and partners, DDG Son insisted that relations with neighboring countries were at the top of Vietnam's list, since these relations directly affect national security. He claimed that, from this perspective, relations with Laos and Cambodia were virtually just as important as those with China. He pointed to border demarcation, outflows of people (the 2001 Montagnard problem), and economic disparities as issues the GVN had to handle well in the interests of national security, and pointed to new forms of economic cooperation with and investment in Laos and Cambodia in particular. He expressed satisfaction over land and sea border demarcation with China, while admitting that fishing rights might remain under negotiation without resolution for the foreseeable future.

16. (SBU) Son described Vietnam's perception that China's foreign policy had undergone a sea change in 2002, with a "dramatic" shift away from security issues -- like the South China Sea -- and instead toward economic issues and a new attention to Southeast Asia. No longer, he said, was Vietnam concerned about any threats from Chinese "misbehavior." However, he cited shared concerns by Vietnam and ASEAN partners about China's "increased weight" and influence in the region, while commenting that Beijing was not trying to "interfere" in domestic policy decisions of these countries per se (unlike the U.S., he noted). He described Chinese "influence" primarily as taking the forms of heightened exports and economic competition. The best hope of Vietnam and ASEAN, he predicted, was to continue to ensure China's "integrated interests" within the region through the ASEAN+3 process, free trade agreements (with expected concessions for countries like Vietnam, he added), and other contacts.

17. (SBU) According to Son, Vietnam's relations with "Big Powers" -- including the U.S. -- were important but clearly secondary to the ties with the neighboring countries. He acknowledged the economic imperatives in particular of better relations with the U.S., EU, and Japan, however.

Multilateral ties

18. (SBU) Son described Vietnam's participation in regional organizations -- notably ASEAN and APEC -- as its most important multilateral goal this year and in the decade ahead. He promised more pro-active cooperation by the GVN in ASEAN counterterrorism initiatives in particular. He acknowledged the potential threats to the region from terrorism that required coordinated planning and responses, and again indicated that the GVN was doing more than the USG might realize. He urged more USG attention to anti-Vietnam "terrorists" such as Ly Tong and Vo Van Duc (both of whom, Pol/C reminded him, were now in custody). Pol/C encouraged an even more pro-active stance by the GVN on counterterrorism not only as important for its ASEAN responsibilities but also as Vietnam continues its quest for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 2008, a goal that Son acknowledged was a high priority for the GVN over the next few years.

Comment

19. (SBU) This appointment had been in the works for months; Embassy does not believe that the MFA chose this opportunity to send a signal that the GVN is no longer interested in a 2004 Prime Ministerial visit. The APEC alternative would be a logical fallback, however, given likely difficulties over scheduling and substance of a visit to Washington this year. Embassy continues to believe that it would be useful to bring a USG delegation to Hanoi to discuss specific U.S. expectations for further progress, both in Vietnam's respect for human rights and in bilateral ties, that would pave the way for an eventual visit, whether in 2004 or 2005.

BURGHARDT